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Gray's Woods Elementary School

2005 - 2006 Intern

First Grade

"Behavior: A Setback to Success"

"People take time. Dealing with discipline takes time. Children are not fax machines or credit cards. When they misbehave, they tell us that they need help learning a better way. They are telling us that there are basic needs not being met which are motivating the behavior" (Mendler 1992).

ABSTRACT

How does behavior affect the overall success of a struggling first grade student? How do these behaviors affect this student's academic progress and social wellbeing? How does a change in environment influence these behaviors? Through a series of interviews, surveys, and observations in my first grade classroom, this inquiry explores these questions and more.

DESCRIPTION OF TEACHING CONTEXT

I am an intern in a first grade classroom at Gray's Woods Elementary School. There are two other first grade classes at the school, and the socioeconomic status ranges from lower to upper-middle class. The 22 students in my class fall within this same range, and there are 12 boys and 10 girls. 86 percent of the class is Caucasian, nine percent is Asian, and five percent is Latino. Since our class, as well as the other first grade classes, has such a wide range of academic abilities, we use a reading support program to help struggling students, in which four of our students participated. In addition, our class contains two English Language Learners, one learning support student, and several students who receive Learning Enrichment.

RATIONALE

Since the beginning of the school year, I have observed many different aspects of our students' personalities, including social behavior, work habits, and academic ability. While each child is quite different in his or her own way, I noticed certain patterns and trends in most of the children in our class. There is one student, however, whose

personality and social interactions caught my attention from the first few weeks of school. (To protect this student's identity, I will refer to him under the pseudonym "Mikey".) As the year progressed, I continued to notice some behavioral differences between Mikey and the rest of the class. His academic progress also caught my attention, as he seemed to struggle in many areas of learning. As Mikey's behaviors and academic progress remained consistent for several months, I began to wonder if they were related, and if so, how?

There was a wide range of behaviors that stood out to me as I observed Mikey. Much of what I saw was related to his time on task, as I constantly noticed his neglect to use time wisely. He also had trouble listening while others spoke and needed constant reminders of rules and routines. I noticed his behaviors having a direct effect on other students. I saw some negative attitudes developing on the part of these other students, complaining that they found Mikey distracting and they found it difficult to work with him.

Given my concerns for both this student's academic progress, as well as his social relationships with the other students in the class, I thought it was important to look at what I can do as a teacher to determine how his behaviors affected his academic progress and social interaction. Understanding this relationship is crucial in order to help not only this student, but also similar students that I may have in the future.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

I found an abundance of information when I began to research the topic of behavior and success. To begin, I asked myself the question, "Why is this important?"

According to James Levin and James Nolan, "minor and major misbehavior reduces learning time for both disruptive students and onlooking students. Less learning time equates to less learning. Although there is not a clear cause-and-effect relationship, there is a positive correlation between poor grades and all types of misbehavior." In addition, classroom discipline problems can negatively affect teachers as well, decreasing teacher effectiveness and career longevity (Levin 32).

Not only does disruptiveness affect the particular student conducting the behavior and the classroom teacher, this can also impact the other students in the class. "Disruptive behavior can result in a 'ripple effect.' In other words, students learn misbehavior from observing misbehavior in other children… This type of observational learning is often accelerated when the onlooking student notices the attention the disruptive student gains from both the teacher and his classmates" (Levin 31).

Alfred Adler and Rudolph Dreikurs believed that people choose whether they want to behave or misbehave. Levin and Nolan agree, stating, "Students who seek power through misbehavior feel that they can do what they want and that nobodt can make them do anything they don't want to do. By challenging teachers, they often gain social acceptance from their peers" (Levin 58).

Behavior management expert John M. Vitto offers numerous suggestions to reduce misbehavior and increase student motivation and achievement. He proposes that teachers need to do their part in executing effective instruction, resulting in student engagement and the opportunity to experience success. Vitto states that, "Students need work that enhances their sense of competency; allows them to develop relationships with others; gives them a degree of freedom, choice, and autonomy; and provides

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opportunities for originality and self-expression" (109). Misbehavior, therefore, can be greatly reduced, or even prevented, by effective teaching strategies.

As educators, we must be careful not to treat difficult students differently than others, which many teachers tend to do. Instead, we must remember that,

> The more difficult the student, the more important it is to use positive and relationship-building strategies over punitive ones. These students need to know they are needed, wanted, and can contribute to the class, and they require a relationship of unconditional acceptance, consistency, and trust… We must make is as hard as possible for students to reject their education (Vitto 177).

As I concluded my research, I came across this statement, which is the fundamental basis for my inquiry:

> Whether we are doing temporary interventions or problem solving, we need to change our focus from 'doing something to' students to 'working with' students. This is the strategy of moving from why to what and how: Instead of getting caught up in asking why students are behaving a certain way, we ask what behaviors we are seeing and hearing minus interpretations and how we can assist students to change behavior patterns (Belvel 156).

Through my inquiry, I do not hope to seek out the "problems" of this particular students, but more so the "why's" behind his behaviors, and the "how's" to inquire what I can do to prepare him for success.

WONDERINGS/QUESTIONS

My main wondering and driving question of this inquiry project is, "How does

behavior affect the success of a struggling student?" From this question, I wanted to know: How does the behavior of this struggling student affect his academic progress? How does his behavior change in different settings or learning environments? How does his behavior affect his social interactions with other students? In what type of learning situation does he most excel? How can I best motivate this struggling student?

INQUIRY VS. PROJECT

When I first began my inquiry, I knew I wanted to determine how behavior affected academic success. Obviously, if a student demonstrates exemplary behavior, his or her academic abilities will most likely benefit. The opposite is also true, that if a student constantly demonstrates negative or disruptive behavior, his or her academics will most likely suffer (Levin 32). However, my curiosity grew about the underlying factors of these main umbrella ideas. I wanted to know what it is specifically about a student's behavior that prevents the achievement of his or her highest academic potential. I also wanted to know if the behaviors I had been observing in this specific student remained consistent across a variety of settings. Perhaps there was something about our classroom, or the way my mentor and I interacted with this student that was contributing to his behavior patterns.

As my inquiry continued, I began to wonder if the behavior I had been observing was affecting this child's social relationships within the classroom, in either a positive or negative manner. By studying all of these factors, I was able to determine the best way to reach this child in order to help him reach his highest potential in the classroom. Without

each step of my inquiry, however, I would not have been able to break down his behavior into a variety of specific factors, all of which contribute to his progress and potential.

INQUIRY PLAN DESCRIPTION

To begin my inquiry, I wanted to learn more about this area of study, so started to research to see what experts had to say about my initial wondering. Since I had thought that behavior and academic success were probably correlated, I wanted some details to see what this might mean in a classroom. I began by simply observing what happened on a daily basis to see where I wanted to focus my study. After I had observed for a while, I decided to use a more systematic observation, and compare the results.

I continued to gather information and began to felt that I was not gaining enough insight. As I acquired more data, I finally felt that I was getting somewhere, thanks to the use of progress reports, teacher and student interviews, and parent surveys. (See DATA COLLECTION) Finally, I analyzed the data, which led me to my conclusions and evidence to support them. I had originally thought that I would design an implementation process to help Mikey, but this was not possible at the time, due to the information I had been gathering. (As I came to the end of my inquiry, I finally could determine how to intervene to help this student and now have a future plan to do so.

Throughout the inquiry process, I periodically conducted more research to coordinate with what I wanted to learn as my project progressed. My inquiry questions had changed several times throughout the process, and new wonderings emerged. Finally, after my inquiry was complete, I had not only gained insight into my original wonderings, but also had developed new questions to address in future studies.

DATA COLLECTION

       To begin my data collection, I started to observe Mikey whenever I could. Since I was concerned about how his behavior affected his work, I needed to pinpoint exactly what he was doing that prevented his best academic performance. Throughout the inquiry experience, I constantly watched Mikey, whether it was during whole-group instruction, independent writing time, lining up, or any other time. While these informal observations were helpful to me, I knew I needed some type of system to really watch this child and record everything that I noticed. My next step was to design a data collection sheet that I could use to observe Mikey in a variety of settings. (Appendix A). I recorded the date and time, activity, any behavior notes, and Mikey's overall success with the activity.

       After several observations with the data collection sheet, and my responsibilities in the classroom increased, I knew that I needed another method of collecting data because it was nearly impossible to sit down and write detailed observation notes for classroom activities. I met with our school's guidance counselor, Nancy Kelly, to receive her input on my inquiry and how I might best go about collecting information. She said that oftentimes, behavior issues like Mikey's often come from simply being distracted. It might be helpful to use a systematic observation to determine the amount of time that Mikey is actually on-task, or engaged in his work, and the amount of time that he is off-task. After speaking to Nancy Kelly, I used a time-on-task data collection sheet to observe Mikey in a variety of settings and activities including whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, independent work, and group work.

At this point, I wanted to determine exactly where Mikey stood in his academic achievement, so I decided to gather some more information. Since my mentor teacher and I had noticed both the behavior and academic struggles of Mikey from earlier in the year (in fact, months before), I decided to look at his progress throughout the school year. I gathered Mikey's progress reports from December, February (which was given by the music, art, and physical education teachers), and also March to compare not only the marks he received, but also the comments the teachers had made. (Appendix C)

Seeing this input from other teachers made me wonder exactly how Mikey behaved in different environments with different teachers, so I decided to interview some of the other people that Mikey spent a significant amount of time with each week. I designed a teacher interview with ten questions about the class climate as a whole, that particular teacher's style (behavior management and motivation), Mikey's behavior and progress, and any general concerns they may have about him. Since I anticipated these interviews to be very telling about Mikey, I decided to record them to enable me to capture everything the teachers said, rather than trying to record pieces of their responses. I interviewed Mikey's physical education and library teachers, and two other teachers that had worked closely with Mikey for about three months in a vigorous reading support program called Jump Start. One of these teachers is a first grade teacher, and the other is an instructional support teacher, who specializes in reading. Interview questions and some quotes from the interviews can be found in Appendix D.

The next step in my inquiry was to learn a little more about the social dynamic of my entire class, while especially focusing on Mikey. Because so much of our behavior as humans is based on how we interact with others, I found this part of the puzzle to be

crucial to my inquiry. In order to do this, I sent home an optional parent survey to each family in my class to complete about their child. (Appendix E) The survey included questions about the child's interests, responsibilities, sleeping habits, interactions with other children, and how he or she is best motivated. To my surprise, I received an incredible response of 20 surveys out of 22 families.

To supplement the parent survey, I also wanted to get some input from my students by interviewing them directly. I knew that I would not have enough time to interview each child in my class, so I took a sample of students that covered a wide range of both academic ability and behavior patterns. First I had students fill out a "smiley-face survey" about how much they liked school, and how hard they tried in school. Their choices ranged from coloring in two smiley faces (they enjoyed school immensely and always tried their hardest), one smiley face, a neutral face, a frowning face, to two frowning faces (they strongly disliked school and never tried their hardest). After this brief survey, I asked the students a series of questions and instructed them to respond as honestly as they could because I was really interested in what they had to say. The questions related to their interests, interaction with other children, responsibilities, as well as several questions about school. (Appendix F) I wanted to determine how much each child enjoyed school, what he or she liked the most and the least, what was most challenging, how he or she is best motivated to succeed, and how much effort he or she regularly puts into schoolwork. Getting input from students themselves is crucial to learning as much information as possible.

DATA ANALYSIS

      As I collected data, I also began to organize and analyze it in a systematic way. I started with the data collection sheets by highlighting specific behaviors that I found to be noteworthy when observing Mikey. After I finished, I could easily scan the observation sheets and look for patterns in behaviors across different types of instructional settings. I then made a list of the behaviors and used tally marks to indicate which behaviors occurred the most. Therefore, I could easily note common behaviors that I noticed in Mikey. I used a similar method to analyze the time-on-task systematic observation sheets by highlighting the percentage of time both Mikey and the comparative student were on-task. This also allowed me to scan through the sheets to note similarities among the types of activities and the amount of time Mikey was able to stay on-task. I compiled the observation sheets according to the percentage of time on-task so that I could see where Mikey was most attentive, through where he was least attentive. I used a different color highlighter to indicate the actual time increments where Mikey was on-task so that I could see patterns where he was both on and off task within each activity.

      Next I analyzed Mikey's overall progress by looking at his progress reports. In each one (December, March, and special classes), I highlighted any areas that spoke to not only Mikey's behavior concerns for that teacher, but also any areas where the teacher expressed concern about Mikey's academic achievement. (Most of these pieces came from the sections "Work Habits and Self Management" and the written comments from the teacher.) I then spread out each progress report to compare the highlighted portions from each and noted the consistencies. In a different color, I also highlighted the areas of

strength that each teacher had marked, and repeated the same process of comparing all three.

The next part of my data analysis was quite time consuming, but also incredibly helpful to my inquiry. After I had recorded my teacher interviews, I listened to each one, constantly stopping, rewinding, and replaying. This recording method enabled me to type quotes from each interview that I found to be important or useful to my inquiry. After I was finished with each interview, I went back through all of the quotes color-coding then according to certain topics. I had five areas: academics, interest, social, overall behavior, and other. Next, I cut out each quote, grouping them together according to the color indicated. By doing this, I had quotes from all of the teachers interviewed grouped by topic and used many of them to support my inquiry.

The final part of data analysis involved my parent surveys and student interviews. Although the parent surveys had the option to be anonymous, I made sure to include a place to indicate the sex of the child. When I went to analyze the surveys, I first separated them by sex, since the behaviors and interests between males and females tend to be quite different. I then went through each survey and made notes in the margins about specific questions and responses that I felt were especially helpful to my inquiry. These questions tended to be the ones about the child's interests and activities, sleep habits, and behavior management systems used at home. Since Mikey's family chose to write his name on the survey, it was easy for me to compare his responses to those of other male students in my class. To analyze the student interviews, I used the same method of making notes in the margins, then compared Mikey's interview to other

students. With my highlighted sections of data and pertinent notes, I was ready to put each of the pieces together to determine what I had found.

CLAIMS AND EVIDENCE

1. Mikey's behavior is consistently disruptive in a variety of settings.

From my own observations of Mikey, I noted that some of his consistent behaviors in our classroom are speaking out while other people are speaking (whether it is a teacher or another student), moving around the room during instructional time (going to his backpack, sharpening his pencil, or getting a drink), and talking to other students located near him during whole-group and small-group instruction, as well as independent work. In order to get Mikey started on work and to then remain on-task, he needs constant reminders from a teacher. This is also true of Mikey to complete everyday routines that we have had in place since the first day of school.

Mikey's progress reports (from his regular classroom, music, art, and physical education) also indicate that he has trouble listening attentively, following directions, working independently, completing assignments on time, practicing self-control, respecting the personal space of others, organizing materials and work, and using time wisely.

During library, Mikey's library teacher, Anne Bruce, said that his behavior sometimes seemed defiant, and that by this point in the year he should be following the rules, but, "for some reason he feels that the rules apply to everyone but him". During Jump Start, a reading support program in which Mikey participated, the Instructional Support Teacher (who is also a reading specialist) noted that, "he required a lot of

redirecting and refocusing, so if I gave a direction, I knew I would also need to get him started… that he's wasn't going to start on his own." During a time-on-task observation during a small-group math activity, I noticed that Mikey was off-task for the majority of the first few minutes, as it took a while for him to start working. (Appendix B) Linda Duffy also noted that during Jump Start, Mikey "tended to have difficulty sustaining once he got started. He would talk quite a bit about things that weren't related to what we were doing."

2. Disruptive behavior results in less class time on-task, prohibiting the highest level of academic achievement.

From conducting the time-on-task observations, I concluded that Mikey has significantly lower percentages of time where he is actually engaged in learning that another average student with whom I compared him to. For example, during a small-group math activity on March 13, 2006, Mikey was on-task 56.1% of the time, where the other student was on task 87.8% of the time. During another activity, which was in a whole-group instruction setting, Mikey was on task 51% of the time, while another average student was on-task 73% of the time. (Appendix B)

After noticing such a difference in Mikey's behavior, I realized how much his academic progress was suffering. Since I was curious to see if this was true in other settings, I was sure to include this in my interview questions with some of Mikey's other teachers. Colleen Sheehan, a first grade teacher who ran the Jump Start program stated, "I do think his issues with reading come from his behaviors and his inattentiveness, and it's hard for him to stay focused on what he's doing." She added, "I think his behavior is

affecting what he's doing with reading and my guess is it's not just with reading. It's probably across the board with everything."

Linda Duffy also expressed her concern about Mikey's reading abilities, stating, "[During Jump Start, he] wasn't making the kind of progress that I think he's capable of making, and those behavioral factors seemed to me to be the critical ones that were keeping him from moving as quickly as he could…. He has the skills that he needs, and should be reading at a higher rate than he is right now." Andy Lloyd, Mikey's physical education teacher had some positive things to say about Mikey's achievements in his class. He said that Mikey, "does a very good job with his skills *when* he's on task—very good job."

Relating to his behavior, my mentor and I had concerns about the lack of work that Mikey completed on a regular basis. As mentioned, Mikey has trouble getting started on his work, and also continuing to work consistently. On the December report, my mentor wrote, "We are continuing to work with [him] on completing his work in a timely manner… [he] still needs several reminders to get started on his work." Because of this, he often is unable to complete assignments, and therefore cannot fully benefit from these academic opportunities.

3. Disruptive behavior results in both positive and negative social interactions.

Mikey really seems to thrive for the attention of others, both teachers and students. To get this attention, he has chosen to act in ways that are inconsistent with classroom rules. Two of Mikey's teachers marked that he was having trouble practicing self-control, which is indicated on both his February and March progress reports.

(Appendix C) From my observations of Mikey, I noticed that his behavior sometimes resulted in social praises from his peers. I began to wonder if part of the reason that Mikey was so disruptive was to get attention not only from the teacher, but also from his classmates. Looking back at some of my observation sheets, I noticed that during whole-group instruction, Mikey tended to make comments to other classmates, or verbally react to something that the teacher said. On March 16, 2006, I also noted that Mikey even decided to leave the whole-group instruction to walk over to the door, which is something that he knows to be against the classroom rules. (Appendix A) By doing this, he had successfully received the attention of my mentor teacher, me, as well as the other students, who watched to see what he was doing. Mikey's choice to behave in this way not only gave him the attention of others in the room, but some of the other children even smiled or laughed at this behavior, to which Mikey also reacted with a smile.

While Mikey has received positive feedback from some peers as a result of his disruptive behavior, he has more often than not caused some social tension among the class. When assigning students a partner to work with for a classroom activity, I have come to find it more difficult to give Mikey a partner that I think he would be work with well. There is only one other person in the class with whom I also have the same difficulty, as most of the students can easily work with each other. When assigning Mikey with a partner, I have observed eyes rolling and verbal disproval coming from the assigned partner. When assigned to work with Mikey, one boy commented, "I feel uncomfortable when I have to work with Mikey because he always tries to do other things than what we're supposed to do."

During my interview with Colleen Sheehan, one of the teachers in the Jump Start program, she explained that she had some social concerns for Mikey, as she was concerned that he was annoying the other students. One student had commented that she wished that Mikey would be moved to another group so that he would be away from her. When talking about this, Colleen stated, "It concerned me that she had picked up on his behaviors… that are also annoying to the kids. I guess what worries me is that it's going to continue and he's going to have trouble developing friendships with the other kids in his class. If that continues, who knows where that will end up as he gets older."

Mikey really seems to thrive for the attention of others, both teachers and students. To get this attention, he has chosen to act in ways that are inconsistent with classroom rules.

4. Interest in subject matter decreases disruptive behavior.

During my interview with Mikey, he indicated that he had a very positive attitude about school, and really did enjoy going each day. He said that his favorite parts of the day were Writers' Workshop and recess, and least favorite parts were math and handwriting. After speaking some more with Mikey, I concluded that he actually learns best (and enjoys the most) activities that allow for creativity and that are more hands-on. Mikey has a hard time sitting still for long periods of time and has a shorter attention span, so auditory learning is difficult for him. I have also concluded that Mikey is not a visual learner, and part of the reason for this is poor eyesight. Therefore, Mikey learns the best by being able to manipulate something, which helps keep him focused.

During a time-on-task observation, I noticed that Mikey was off-task for the first two minutes, then was mostly on-task for about two minutes. As the activity required more hands-on work, Mikey's on-task behavior remained fairly consistent for most of the time. (Appendix B) From this, I realized that Mikey had trouble getting started on some activities, but once he did, he was engaged. Being able to work with his hands was something that helped Mikey to stay focused.

During my interviews with two of the teachers in Jump Start, they had indicated that they did not think that Mikey had made the progress that he was capable of making. Since the program tends not to provide for the hands-on learning that Mikey works best with, this was probably part of the reason that he was having some trouble with his behavior. Linda Duffy stated, "He tended not to invest in it very quickly. He didn't find it enjoyable, or at least his behavior would show that he didn't. He would pull back from it, lay his head down on the desk, or say, 'I don't want to do this.'" Because of his lack of interest in reading, Mikey did not make the progress that he probably would have been able to make, had he been interested, and had his learning style been addressed more in the program.

When observing Mikey during other times of the day, it is quite clear that when he is interested in something, he really focuses. For example, during Writers' Workshop, we rarely need to correct Mikey's behavior, because he is engaged in his work and remains on-task. One example that I found to be quite interesting was that in Mikey's February progress report, his music teacher indicated that Mikey, "has a nice singing voice." I wondered if this was an area that might be of interest to Mikey, knowing that music is one of his strengths. One April afternoon, our class (along with most other

classes in the school) saw a vocal and instrumental concert. In the past Mikey had needed constant reminders to behave during these large group settings, but on this day, he was so enthralled by the presentation that he did not need a single reminder about his behavior for the entire concert.

When Mikey has little interest in the subject matter, however, his behavior changes drastically. For example, during whole-group math instruction (which Mikey indicated that he did not enjoy), I see that he constantly acts out and needs reminders to stay focused. Since he has less interest in the subject, Mikey learns better to learn by *doing*, rather than hearing or seeing.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEW WONDERINGS

While I learned a great deal not only about Mikey and my students, but also about myself as a teacher, my inquiry project did not progress in exactly the way that I had predicted. As I collected more and more data, I was not gaining enough insightful information about Mikey to generate claims about his behavior and success. I had originally planned on gathering information, then forming some type of intervention or implementing a plan. However, I found that I needed more information in order to gain useful knowledge about my inquiry, and had to continue to gather data. Now that I have reached the end of the project, I am ready to take the information that I learned and use it in my classroom with my interactions with Mikey. I have insight into what it might take to help this child, and in that respect, for both Mikey and me, my inquiry project was absolutely priceless.

Although I still have concerns about Mikey, I believe that he has the potential to succeed. Through my inquiry, I see the areas where Mikey struggles, and if they continued, I would be greatly concerned about his future in school. However, by conducting this inquiry, I now have the insight into what is behind his behavior, how it affects his learning and social interactions. During our interview, Anne Bruce, Mikey's library teacher, stated, "I think there's hope for him, definitely. I think that underneath there, there's a part of him that does want to please." I could not agree more with Anne's statement, as it is my job as one of Mikey's teachers to get him to rise to his full potential.

After conducting this inquiry, I realize just how much I learned that I can now take with me to my future years of teaching. I had begun this project partly out of frustration with a particular student, not understanding why he constantly seemed to misbehave and disrupt the class. After my observations and the execution of this inquiry, I can now understand that so many factors needed to be taken into consideration: the classroom environment, other students, learning style, interests, attention span and time-on-task, and more. Through my inquiry about a particular student, I saw first-hand that a slight curiosity or wondering into a teaching situation can lead to a plethora of knowledge that I can now carry with me throughout my career.

As my inquiry unfolded, I not only searched for answers to my original wondering, but also developed new ones along the way. Now, at the end of my project, I know so much more not only about this student, but also about how children can best succeed in school. While I did learn a wealth of new information, my work is not done. I

have now developed new wonderings that could continue this inquiry, or lead into a new one:

How can positive reinforcement affect a student's constant need for attention?

How will students best respond to instruction, in terms of their own personal learning style?

How would consistency among teacher expectations and behavior management in all environments (the regular classroom and specials) affect a student's behavior?

How is a student's behavior in school influenced by his or her life at home, in terms of responsibility and discipline? Expectations? Relationships with parents and siblings?

How could student input into the curriculum affect their interest in subject matter and ability to learn?

Once a student is motivated, how can his positive behavior best be sustained?

Throughout this inquiry about one particular student, I learned so much about my own teaching and can now apply that information to other students that I have currently, or will have in the future. Without conducting an inquiry project, I never would have had this opportunity to learn such valuable information that will now not only guide, but drastically improve my future instruction.

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